



**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency



# REFUGEE-LED INNOVATIONS DURING COVID-19

**BEST PRACTICES FROM 2020 NGO INNOVATION  
AWARD**

## Acknowledgements

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#### **COVER PHOTOGRAPH:**

Members of Solidarity of Refugee Women for the Social Welfare (SOFERES) distribute hygiene equipment and food parcels to high-risk families in Malawi

© SOFERES





Jóvenes Contra la Violencia (JCV), one of the seven winners of the 2020 NGO Innovation Award, decorates and cleans the neighbourhood ©JCV/2020

## BACKGROUND

In 2020, the UNHCR's Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) Innovation Award recognized the innovative solutions and responses to COVID-19 developed by refugee-led organisations (RLOs).

COVID-19 has exacerbated risks, challenges and needs for refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and stateless persons around the world. At the same time, the pandemic has spurred innovation and mobilized multifaceted responses by local actors, including organizations led by refugees, IDPs and other community-based organizations. They quickly responded to the needs of their communities, often with very limited resources. Their innovative responses have been instrumental in mitigating increased socio-economic risks, sexual and gender-based violence, food insecurity, and difficulties in accessing basic services due to the pandemic.

To recognize their achievements, UNHCR dedicated its [2020 NGO Innovation Award](#) to RLOs that developed creative responses to support their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through this Award, UNHCR wishes to showcase the leadership and crucial contributions of these RLOs in supporting their communities, and thus, demonstrate the need to expand and strengthen our partnerships with them.

Seven winners representing seven different regions: Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia Pacific, and the Middle East were selected and received US\$15,000 to continue and expand their work. In addition to the seven winners of the Award, many other noteworthy examples of innovative responses devised by RLOs stand out from over 400 nominations received.


Through featuring the wide set of diverse initiatives, including the work of the additional 13 organizations, UNHCR hopes to bring greater visibility to their important and innovative work and encourage new initiatives and good practices.








More information about RLOs is accessible by clicking on their website or social media icons.

### **Criteria for the 2020 NGO Innovation Award and this publication**

1. The understanding of the challenge or issue at hand;
2. The novelty of the solution;
3. The inclusion of a variety of actors in designing the solution or project;
4. The potential impact and/or the initial findings/results achieved;
5. A clear implementation plan.

# INTRODUCTION

This publication features the work of 20 organizations, including the 7 winners marked with , namely:

| Americas                                    |   |
|---|---|
| p.8   | <b>Instituto sobre Migracion y Refugio LGBTIQ para Centroamérica (IRCA CASABIERTA), Costa Rica</b>  |
| p.9   | <b>Jóvenes Contra la Violencia (JCV), Honduras</b>   |
| p.9   | <b>Jumpstart Refugee Talent, Canada</b>   |
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| Asia and the Pacific                        |   |
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| Southern Africa                             |   |
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The majority of the interventions led by refugee organizations focused on **advocacy, education, and livelihoods**. For instance, numerous organizations countered misinformation about COVID-19 through awareness raising campaigns, and supported the education of refugee youth, including via online classes. They also provided skills training and income generation support for refugees, IDPs and host communities. Moreover, RLOs advocated for the rights of sub-groups within refugee and IDP communities, including **those with different gender identities and sexual orientations (LGBTIQ+), survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, people with disabilities, women and the elderly**. Refugee leaders and RLOs reached out to these groups to understand and address their specific needs. Often, this was made possible by drawing on the personal experiences of volunteers and personnel as members of the communities themselves.

Pre-established organizations readily adapted their usual operations to address emergent needs as the result of COVID-19. They drew on their existing programmes and strengths to guide their innovative responses. For instance, RLOs with musical expertise provided online musical education, those with fashion design livelihood programmes brought in alumni to sew masks, and one with culinary street fair experience created a meal delivery service. Other organizations were established to address the COVID-19 pandemic and relied on both host and refugee communities to support their response.

RLOs made great use of **technology and digital communications** during this time of isolation. Several organizations moved their usual in-person services online through remote delivery of information and services. Some used social media, filmed and shared videos, as well as digital crowdfunding platforms to raise awareness and gain support for their responses. A few RLOs partnered with local radio stations to broadcast information and created phone helplines to deliver medical or psychological assistance.

The innovative solutions of these organizations led by refugees have contributed to greater, more meaningful interaction between refugees and host communities, helping foster a climate of trust and peaceful coexistence. In addition, through collaboration with international, national and local organizations – be it through the provision of skills, resources, or connections - RLOs were able to reinforce social cohesion and expand their impact beyond their communities.



IRCA CASABIERTA staff work in their office in Costa Rica to provide for LGBTQI+ refugee communities  
©Instituto sobre Migracion y Refugio LGBTQI para Centroamérica (IRCA CASABIERTA)

## Instituto sobre Migracion y Refugio LGBTQI+ para Centroamérica (IRCA CASABIERTA), Costa Rica



**IRCA CASABIERTA provided livelihood and self-reliance support to LGBTQI+ refugees and asylum seekers in Costa Rica through an online training programme and provision of essential goods and information in the face of COVID-19.**

Founded by Dennis Castillo Fuentes - the first person in Costa Rica to be granted refugee status for the risk of persecution for reasons of sexual orientation - IRCA CASABIERTA advocates for those facing persecution as the result of their gender or sexual identity in Central America. During the pandemic, their team facilitated a three-month virtual training programme for a group of LGBTQI+ refugees and asylum seekers. As part of a professional volunteer programme and in collaboration with corporations, LGBTQI+ refugees and asylum-seekers received a basic English course, training on how to enter the job market including resumé building and interview practice. Recognizing that LGBTQI+ populations are more vulnerable to the virus as they have higher rates of HIV, often live in isolation and are reluctant to seek assistance due to fear of discrimination, IRCA CASABIERTA rapidly developed a comprehensive response: they provided personal protective equipment, healthcare information, food baskets and housing rental support to address the basic needs of LGBTQI+ refugees in Costa Rica.



## Jóvenes Contra la Violencia (JCV), Honduras



**Jóvenes Contra la Violencia (JCV) designed their “Let’s Go Back to the Table” as a method of preventing violence among displaced youth and families.**

With the arrival of COVID-19, levels of domestic and gender-based violence, as well as organized crimes, escalated throughout Honduras. Relying on their past experience in violence prevention and protection of displaced youth once recruited by criminal gangs, JCV created “Let’s Go Back to the Table” - a multifaceted initiative addressing misinformation, socio-economic and psychosocial needs among forcibly displaced communities.

Using a risk analysis tool, JCV identified 200 people affected by forced displacement and for whom the risk of violence was high and asked them to participate in the “Let’s Go Back to the Table” initiative. The initiative urged families to create a ‘family life plan’ that defined tasks to be done at home and within the community that encouraged dialogue and conflict identification. JCV staff followed up with families via home visits, phone calls, text messages, and online sessions. JCV’s various methods of violence prevention encouraged conflict resolution among vulnerable community members.

## Jumpstart Refugee Talent, Canada



**As refugees’ unemployment rate peaked at an unprecedented level in Canada, Jumpstart Refugee Talent used digital technologies to enhance effective employment seeking and hiring processes.**

With 5-year experience of supporting newly settled refugees in Canada to secure meaningful employment, Jumpstart quickly transitioned all their activities to online platforms in the face of COVID-19. They connected refugees with mentors through online workshops and roundtables as well as provided pre-employment consultation and support.

Jumpstart also developed [an online talent hiring portal](#) where refugees learn about employment opportunities and private recruitment events while employers have easy access to a talent pool of refugees. With the help of Jumpstart, in 2020, 60 refugees succeeded to secure an employment with an average income of CAD\$ 48,000, and 22 refugees got educational credentials which are recognized both in Canada and in their home country. Jumpstart also launched HerStartup programme, which was able to support 90 refugee women entrepreneurs to launch their businesses during a time of recession.



One of Open Taste's refugee chefs prepares a meal to support their delivery of meals to refugee families in need © Open Taste

## Open Taste, Brazil



**Open Taste - a restaurant in São Paulo - launched a meal delivery service produced by refugee chefs for refugee communities affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.**

Open Taste was originally a public street food fair, operating as a private corporation, when they pivoted their operations to assist refugees and migrants in both skill development and income generation. In July 2020, Open Taste launched an innovative meal delivery service to minimize the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The food was prepared by refugee chefs and delivered to refugee families from Venezuela, Syria, Colombia, Armenia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. As Open Taste's meals drew the interest of the broader Brazilian community, they launched a series of online courses led by refugee and migrant chefs aimed for those interested in joining the delivery service and hoping to learn more about different cuisines. At the time of the Award, Open Taste had already generated income to several refugee families, and planned to expand the programme to provide income generation activities for 100 refugee and migrant families

## Latin Vox Machine, Argentina



**Latin Vox Machine (LVM) - a symphonic orchestra in Argentina largely composed of refugees and IDPs mainly from Central America - moved their work online during COVID-19 and created Latin Vox Academy, a digital musical education platform.**

Since their foundation, Latin Vox Machine – an orchestra formed of refugee musicians from all over the world - Venezuela, Colombia, Chile, Syria, etc. - knew they wanted to expand the project into the digital world. COVID-19 accelerated this goal and [Latin Vox Academy](#) was born to offer online singing and music lessons, as well as professional development classes in audiovisual production, and English classes for musicians. With donations of laptops, cameras, sound and lighting equipment from UNHCR and the International Organization of Migration (IOM), Latin Vox Academy supported and trained 12 music teachers from their orchestra in audiovisual editing and online class delivery. With these new courses, Latin Vox Academy's music teachers received a source of income, and their classes provided Argentinian society with a cultural learning space in a time of isolation.

## Omar's Film School, Bangladesh



**Omar's Film School identified the scarcity of information about COVID-19 in the Rohingya language as a major challenge for the illiterate in Cox's Bazar, and decided to create a song and videos raising awareness about the pandemic.**

Focused on training youth in photography and videography, Omar's Film School was well-equipped to create [a Covid-19 awareness song in the Rohingya language](#). The video was created by volunteers that interpreted and translated international health guidelines into Rohingya and then shared them through a song teaching the importance of wearing masks and handwashing.

In addition, during their awareness-raising sessions, 20 short videos on COVID-19 were shared with the Rohingya and host community. After the videos' release, refugees and host communities were more willing to access the health interventions in Cox's Bazar.





A member of Roshan Learning Center delivers an online class to refugee children and youth  
© Roshan Learning Center

## Roshan Learning Center, Indonesia 🏆



**Roshan Learning Center has empowered over 500 asylum-seeking and refugee children and youth in Jakarta, Indonesia by converting to digital learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

Roshan Learning Center created a remote support program that provided students with information packages about at-home learning and solutions to common technology problems, thereby connecting with refugee youth who were isolated and forced to remain at home due to COVID-19 restrictions. By creating safe and welcoming learning for children and youth even at-home, the Roshan Learning Center helped them improve their literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional learning.

Roshan also breaks down barriers to education through various other programmes created during the pandemic, such as their [General Education Diploma \(GED\) Support Programme](#) that already has 66 graduates, and the Roshan “[Girls Gang](#)” that promotes socializing and bonding for refugee girls within and beyond the classroom.

## Fútbol Más, Kenya



**As the pandemic shut down on-field games and sporting events, Fútbol Más created “My Home, My Playground” initiative to promote a healthy lifestyle and well-being of children and families while at home.**

Only weeks after the first lockdown in Kenya, Fútbol Más, in collaboration with UNHCR, launched “[My Home, My Playground](#)” initiative to provide school-aged children and families in Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps and across Nairobi with sport and play-based videos, creative online challenges, stories of resilience and radio sessions on COVID-19 prevention measures. In addition, by using both technology-based applications such as Moodle and Nivelat, and through the delivery of training materials to families without smart phones, Fútbol Más organized weekly mental health and psychosocial support sessions. More than 7,000 children in Kakuma, Kalobeyei, Dadaab and Nairobi, where nearly half being girls and children with special needs benefitted from these sessions. Beyond providing psychosocial and mental health support to children, their parents and caregivers in these trying times, the programme also reinforced meaningful bonds between family members and the local community.

## Refugee Youth Education Hub (RYEH), Kenya



**Refugee Youth Education Hub - an organization supporting access to education of youth in Dadaab Refugee Camp - created a way to get reading resources to school-aged children while also countering misinformation about the pandemic.**

RYEH’s founder, Abdullahi Dahir Mire fled Somalia and lived in Dadaab Refugee Camp, Kenya as a child during the 1990s. Recognized the importance of education for refugee youth in the camp, he created RYEH in 2018. In partnership with Books for Africa, RYEH established the volunteer-run initiative, Dadaab Books Drive. The public campaign collected over 60,000 books to support youth education. Books were donated to primary and secondary schools as well as were used to form a public library for refugees and host communities in the camp.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, RYEH also hosted a radio show in Somali, Oromo, Swahili, and English that debunked misinformation about COVID-19. Broadcast out of a converted UNHCR shipping container and in collaboration with Radio Gargaar, RYEH’s programme has influenced Dadaab’s community to adopt more protective measures.





Masks created by alumni and trainees from Resilience Action International's tailoring programmes - central to their livelihood programme, Edulives © Resilience Action International (RAI)

## Resilience Action International (RAI), Kenya



**Resilience Action International (RAI) - a RLO specializing in adult education, economic empowerment and adolescent reproductive health - quickly adapted the delivery of their programmes to digital platforms in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.**

When COVID-19 hit Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, RAI collaborated with UNHCR implementing partners and host community-led organizations to expand its delivery scope to online platforms. For instance, RAI collaborated with the Ipas Africa Allian – a NGO that focuses on women's health, to organize intensive online programmes on sexual and reproductive health. Delivered through WhatsApp and SMS, their health programmes provided survivors and those at risk of violence with the tools to seek professional help, as sexual assault and domestic violence increased during lockdown.

In addition, alumni and trainees of RAI's tailoring programmes also mobilized to make and distribute face masks to refugees. Tailoring and design are central to RAI's Education for Livelihoods ([Edulives](#)) programme that supports livelihood and literacy among refugee youth in Kakuma.



## SINA LOKETA (SINAL), Uganda



**Based in Bidibidi refugee settlement in Uganda, SINA LOKETA (SINAL) supported online learning and livelihood during COVID-19 in eco-friendly ways.**

Realizing the major obstacle to online learning in Bidibidi refugee settlement was the lack of digital infrastructure, SINAL devised a creative solution using solar energy to power their community networking. They managed to provide 100 students and 40 teachers with access to free internet connection, software packages and e-learning.

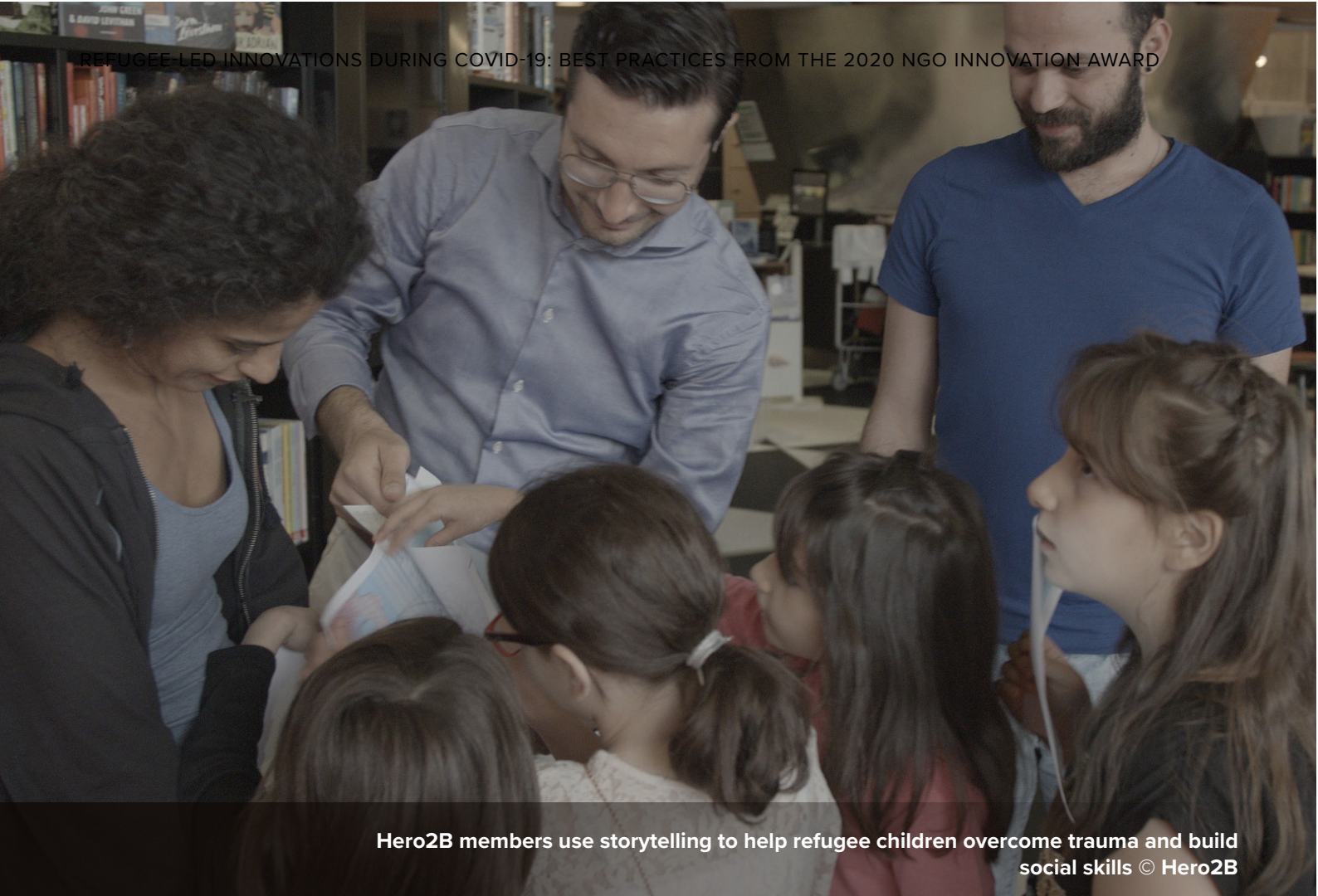
In addition, amid COVID-19, SINAL shifted their [entrepreneurship programme](#) which allows 180 scholars to gain hands-on business experience and develop actual projects every year, to online platform. Afia Porridge – one of the five start-ups supported by SINAL's online programme, employed and empowered refugee women through the farming of mushroom, soya beans, millets and sorghums to produce nutrient-rich porridge powder. The initiative delivered 1,000 kilograms of porridge powder to 100 pregnant women and 80 teenage mothers to boost their immune system during the pandemic. Afia Porridge ranked among the top winners of the [Social Impact Award Uganda](#).

## Cultuur in Harmonie, Netherlands



**When in-person assistance for refugees was inaccessible during COVID-19 lockdowns, four RLOs collaborated to create Helpdesk Newcomers - a virtual helpdesk for migrants and refugees - in just two weeks**

[Helpdesk Newcomers](#) was formed by four refugee-led organizations: Cultuur in Harmonie, Lemat Foundation, Nieuwlander Foundation, and Syrian Volunteers. The helpdesk provided support to asylum seekers and refugees by phone during the week and 24/7 via social media. Three coordinators worked alongside 40 volunteers to provide vital information on COVID-19, support families homeschool their children, help complete social security forms, and provide community comfort. Their social media livestreams create awareness about COVID-19 to counter misinformation among thousands of asylum-seekers and refugees.



Hero2B members use storytelling to help refugee children overcome trauma and build social skills © Hero2B

## Hero2B, Sweden 🏆



**Hero2B - founded by a Syrian refugee with firsthand experience of the challenges faced by refugee youth – provides psychosocial support to refugee children through innovative tools.**

Hero2B's founder, Imad Elabdala, who fled Syria for Sweden, where he arrived in 2013 and suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), created the organization to provide support for refugee children facing mental health challenges.

Amidst uncertainty and fear during the COVID-19 pandemic, Hero2B provided child-friendly mental health and psychosocial support in accessible and fun ways through storytelling, video games, stories, films, and interactive learning programmes. Notably, Hero2B's approach was consultative and inclusive as they collaborated with psychologists, researchers, schools and school-aged children, including refugees to develop these materials. With their online programmes, as of September 2020, Hero2B had reached over 15,000 individuals in Sweden, Germany, Austria and the Netherlands.

## Association Vivre Ensemble pour la citoyenneté et le développement, Morocco 🏆



**Vivre Ensemble – a refugee youth-led organization - devised multiple initiatives to help vulnerable people in their community and host communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.**

As a member of UNHCR's Global Youth Advisory Council, Vivre Ensemble provides a space for refugee youth to take leadership roles and design solutions to problems faced by refugee and host communities. During COVID-19, young refugees at Vivre Ensemble carried out awareness raising campaigns in the neighbourhoods where refugees, migrants and Moroccan citizens live together. They sensitized them on the spread and prevention of COVID-19 through visits while respecting the containment measures, and by distributing flyers, awareness videos in multiple languages, and Instagram livestreams. Vivre Ensemble also distributed food baskets and rent contribution vouchers to more than 2,300 individuals from both refugee and host communities. Through participation at Vivre Ensemble, young refugees demonstrated social responsibility.

## Free Yezidi Foundation (FYF), Iraq



**As an organization founded and led by Yezidi women, Free Yezidi Foundation (FYF) provides support for the mental wellbeing of families in the Kurdistan region of Iraq.**

Specialized in the delivery of psychological first aid (PFA), trauma counselling and stabilization, FYF adapted their usual functions to the digital world when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. FYF's trauma team and psychologists created and shared [psycho-educational podcasts](#) about wellbeing and [self-care](#) as well as guided meditations during lockdown across social media platforms and via WhatsApp. Through innovative awareness-spreading, FYF ensured access to mental health resources and accurate information about COVID-19 to 600 families and 1,500 Yezidis in Iraq's, Sharya and Sheikhan camps.



## Solidarity of Refugee Women for the Social Welfare (SOFERES), Malawi



**Responding to the needs of vulnerable groups among women and girls, SOFERES conducted a sensitization campaign targeting these groups in Dzaleka Camp and provided them with essential goods.**

Since the onset of COVID-19, SOFERES - a women-led refugee organization - identified the most vulnerable groups among women affected by COVID-19, such as women of older age, single mothers and women living with disabilities or chronic conditions. With the support of the Women First International Fund, SOFERES distributed hygiene equipment and food parcels to around 400 women belonging to those groups, and 200 most-affected families. SOFERES also raised awareness on COVID-19 prevention measures through a local radio station, megaphones and Whatsapp groups. These initiatives contributed to boosting the confidence of many women and girls, who were forced to stay at home during lockdowns and struggled to provide food for their families.

## The Fruit Basket, South Africa



**During COVID-19, The Fruit Basket supported Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex (LGBTQI+) refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa who were ostracized from their home communities and faced increased difficulty obtaining official documentation.**

The Fruit Basket - created by refugees that have fled their home countries due to discrimination related to their gender or sexual identities - promotes the recognition and acceptance of African LGBTQI+ asylum seekers and refugees. In collaboration with the African LGBTQ+ Migration Research Network, Holy Trinity LGBT Ministry, and GALA Queer Archive, they implemented 'Community Action Networks' that provided peer support, counselling, and community connection to over 110 LGBTQI+ refugees and asylum seekers.

They also created an online crowd-funding campaign that raised £6,502 sent through direct cash transfer to LGBTQI+ asylum seekers and refugees from 17 African countries to meet their day-to-day needs. The Fruit Basket acted as both a lifeline and a strong advocate by developing resourceful solutions uniquely suited to LGBTQI+ asylum seekers and refugees.

## UMOJA FOR AFRICA, South Africa



**During COVID-19, UMOJA FOR AFRICA provided protective equipment and support for income generation for female refugees and members of host communities.**

Once national restrictions eased in the townships of Gugulethu and Khayelitsha in Cape Town, UMOJA identified two major barriers that prevented children from returning to school: the shortage of personal protective equipment, and the lack of affordable sanitary items for girls.

Alongside UNHCR and the local community, UMOJA devised a project inspired by the solutions they had used as young girls. They designed prototypes for reusable masks and sanitary towels and employed women refugees as well as locals to sew the products. With the help of the Activist Education Centre (AEDC), Movement for Change and Social Justice (MCSJ), African Centre for HIV/AIDS Management, and Stellenbosch University, they distributed 15,000 masks and 2,500 sanitary items while sharing accurate information about the pandemic. Their project was able to address several COVID-19-related issues – namely unemployment, misinformation about the pandemic and friction between host community and refugees over scarcity of resources.

## Great Step Initiative, Nigeria



**As the number of cases of COVID-19 were rising in Nigeria, refugees and host community leaders in the Adagom Refugee Settlement came together to form the Great Step Initiative (GSI) - a community-based organization tackling the spread of the virus in multiple ways.**

Great Step Initiative was able to tackle the multi-faceted issues linked to COVID-19 by taking a comprehensive approach: countering myths and misinformation; producing sanitation and protective equipment and strategically installing handwashing stations in marketplaces; as well as providing counselling via hotlines. Specifically, refugees were trained to produce liquid soap and hand sanitizers, while volunteers with sewing and fashion design experience created and distributed 1,000 masks to refugees. Both refugees and host communities benefited from these responses, which also improved their relationship. As a result of the initiatives, refugees, women and girls, were empowered with vocational skills as a source of livelihood.



Members of Potential Leaders for Sustainable Future hold posters spreading awareness about the spread and prevention of COVID-19 in Liberia © Potential Leaders for Sustainable Future

## Potential Leaders for Sustainable Future, Liberia



**To address the heightened vulnerability of persons with disabilities during COVID-19 due to lack of access to information and basic services and exclusion from decision-making processes, Potential Leaders for Sustainable Future designed and implemented disability- inclusive COVID-19 responses.**

Volunteers were trained in sign language to make flyers and videos about where and how to seek assistance and access to basic services during lockdowns for deaf communities. In partnership with ActionAid Liberia, Potential Leaders produced a jingle that was broadcast across four counties in Liberia and spread information about COVID-19 prevention and response for the visually impaired. They also distributed goods such as rice and oil for under-privileged communities at the School of the Blind in Mango Town and the Montserrado School of the Deaf.



# CONCLUSION

This report highlights 20 refugee-led innovations that were devised to address the needs of refugees, displaced and stateless persons and host communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. These examples underscore the critical role of refugee-led organizations in humanitarian operations. The role of the displaced themselves in designing and implementing solutions to the challenges they face, especially in the current context that is shaped by restrictions on travel and movement because of COVID 19, cannot be overemphasised. This report hopes to inspire and to allow others to replicate and scale up similar initiatives.

In 2021, UNHCR for the first time ever dedicated the NGO Innovation Award to refugee-led organizations. This is part of an ongoing effort of UNHCR to develop and support the meaningful and active participation and inclusion of local actors and the affected populations. Advancing the localization agenda in refugee context will require collaboration across UN agencies, governments, international and national governmental organizations, private sector, academia, displaced and host communities, to ensure a more transformational, inclusive and empowering approach. To further support refugee-led organizations, UNHCR has invited the 2021 Award winning refugee-led organizations to co-design UNHCR's innovation fund. The fund is a new mechanism that will support locally based solutions to challenges identified by the displaced themselves and will provide opportunities for further collaboration amongst and with local actors and organizations led by those affected by humanitarian crises and conflict.